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CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE LIGHT OF MODERN THOUGHT

X.

Jesus As Uniting the Principles of Conservatism and Reform

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JESUS AS UNITING THE PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATISM AND REFORM.

"Think not I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."—MATT. v. 17.

I PROPOSE to speak to-day of Jesus in his relation to human progress and human stability. Men usually differ from each other in this. Some tend strongly to believe in freedom; others, to believe in order. Some are born reformers; others, conservatives. Conservatives are endowed with reverence. They reverence the past, the old, the established authorities, the beliefs which have taken possession of the world. They have faith in something fixed and sure: they dread change. Such men keep society from losing its past acquisitions. They save what has been gained. They make progress possible, for there can be no accumulation unless we keep what we already possess. Social civilization rests on this class of minds as on a safe foundation. However the building may be enlarged, improved, decorated, its foundation stands sure. The true conservative is one who holds fast to fundamental convictions, the treasured experiences of mankind, the long acquisitions of history. He does not expect a progress which shall drop from the sky, but one which will grow out of a living root in the past. He believes in reform, not revolution; in development, not catastrophe. The true conservative, in whose mind reverence for order is supreme, is the rudder which holds the ship to its course, and prevents it

from being swept away by the fashion or the passion of the hour.

But besides the helm the ship needs sails, and the reformer furnishes the sails. His element is hope. He believes in better things, in the possibility of improvement, the power of truth. He does not look back regretfully to a past paradise, but hopefully to a kingdom of heaven at hand. His prophetic eye is fixed on the future. He furnishes impulse, motive, enthusiasm, ardent faith. The conservative saves us from incessant change, the reformer from rigid routine; and both together make progress possible.

In the greatest souls of earth these two elements are united. Such men as Socrates, Epictetus, Marcus Antoninus were both reformers and conservatives,—believing in order and in freedom, rejoicing in all that the past has achieved of great and good, but hopeful of better days to come. And so in Jesus we find both elements united and harmonized; indeed, harmonized so entirely, fused so completely, that we should not think of giving him either name. He is higher than reformer, higher than conservative.

In fact, we have an instinctive feeling concerning Jesus that prevents us from putting him into any category. We never call him patriot or philanthropist or saint or hero or philosopher. Each of these expressions is partial, and describes a single kind of excellence. The life which was in Jesus took up all these elements into a higher unity. He was a harmony of all.

The apostle Paul had this conception of Jesus, his great master, when he used the word *pleroma*, or fulness. For example, he desires that all the disciples may become perfect men, rising into "the fulness of Christ" (Eph. iv. 13). And, again, he says that it pleased the Father that "all fulness should dwell" in Jesus (Col. i. 19); and that "in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily," and

"ye are made full in him" (Col. ii. 9). John says, "Of his fulness we all received, and grace for grace" (John i. 16). This fulness of life in Jesus made a profound impression on the minds of his followers, and this has prevented them from calling him patriot or reformer or philanthropist. But all these elements of human greatness are in Jesus. That feeling which we call patriotism, that love of country which makes men willing to die for it, which makes the American feel a thrill of pride and joy at the sight of the stars and stripes in a foreign land,—this was in Jesus. Though he lived and died for the world, though in him there was neither Jew nor Samaritan, yet how profound that love of his country which led him to weep at the sight of Jerusalem as he looked across the valley from the Mount of Olives at its stately walls and noble Temple, saying, "If thou hadst known in this day, even thou, the things which belong unto peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes." And, again, "O Jerusalem! Jerusalem! which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings; and ye would not!" So, too, the element of philanthropy was in him, though we never call him a philanthropist. But he lived and died, not to save his own soul, but to save his fellow-men; to seek and save the lost and wandering souls, the souls that had lost their way in the world. He came to give liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, feet to the lame, comfort to the prisoner and slave. Nor do we ever call him a saint. We say Saint Peter and Saint Paul, but we know it would be a degradation to Jesus to give him that title. Yet he was the chief of saints, if to be a saint means to dwell always in the love of God, to devote one's whole life to the service of God, to deny one's self and take up the cross from the sense of duty. Nor do we ever call him a martyr,

though he himself said, "For this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I might be a martyr to the truth."*

In like manner, and for the same reason, we never call him a reformer; and yet he was the greatest, the boldest, the most radical of reformers. He found the sacred religion of his fathers turned into an idolatry of rules and methods. The Sabbath was kept in minute strictness of the letter. The Temple was worshipped as the one sacred spot on the earth. The Pharisees were reverenced as examples of holy piety. Gentiles and Samaritans were despised by the Jews, who held themselves to be God's chosen and favorite people on earth. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man." He cured the sick on the Sabbath, and walked in the fields on that day with his disciples; he dined with Roman publicans, he talked with the Samaritan woman; he said that God was not worshipped in the Temple, but in every honest heart where dwelt spirit and truth. He taught that many should come from the east and west, and sit with Abraham and Isaac in the kingdom of the Messiah, while some Jews should be rejected; and he called the Pharisees blind leaders of the blind. So Jesus rose above the ideas of his time, the prejudices of his nation, the partialities of his age. Thus his word, like hammer and fire, broke in pieces the hard formality and stiff routine of popular belief. So he opened a new path upward into a better faith.

The two tendencies of thought which he had to oppose were those of the Pharisee and Sadducee: that is, dogmatism and scepticism. These are still, and always will be, the tendencies that need to be reformed. The Pharisee is the man who sits in Moses' seat or in Christ's seat, and

* The Greek word in the text (*martureso*), translated in our version "bear witness," is that from which our word "martyr" is derived.

undertakes to speak with authority. He is the religious master, the authentic leader of the Church, the teacher of the true belief. The Pharisee is the man of routine, who worships forms, ceremonies, and ritual, who continues to idolize them after the life has gone out of them. He builds monuments to the prophets of a past day, and opposes the new prophet whom God may send. He tithes mint and forgets justice. The proper form of baptism is more important to him than the rights of man or woman. He doubts whether a heretic or infidel can be saved, but is ready to canonize any tyrant or oppressor of the race who has given money to build churches and found monasteries, or endow missionary societies and theological schools. He defends slavery and war, and thinks that the man who believes that God may possibly save all of his children cannot himself be saved.

The Sadducee is the child of the Pharisee, his legitimate descendant. Very often, indeed, we find the bitterest infidel has been brought up in a home where has prevailed a hard, cold, and cruel form of religion. He goes to the opposite extreme. Because the Christianity of the Church is narrow and harsh, he rejects the large and sweet Christianity of Jesus. Because the future life has been painted in such glaring and lurid colors, he gives up his faith in immortality. Because he has been asked to believe what shocked his reason, he becomes an agnostic and believes nothing. Because he shrinks from the God of Calvin, he lives without any faith in the infinite tenderness of the heavenly Father. Horace says, "When fools shun one vice, they run into the opposite." The sceptic who sees no truth anywhere, who has faith in nothing, may not be a fool. He is often very acute, a man of knowledge; but he has no knowledge of the great realities, of the infinite and eternal laws of being, of the Divine Love which alone can fill life with joy and rob death of terror.

But observe this, that, while Jesus spoke with such awful solemnity of the Pharisee, he said little against the Sadducee. This shows that the chief danger is not from scepticism or doubt, but from a perverse religion. Religion is so natural to man, unbelief is so foreign to man's nature, that mankind will prefer any form of superstition to the nakedness and chill of atheism. Substitute a true and a better religion for a false one, and you overcome at the same time the evils of dogmatism and those of scepticism.

Those who criticise Jesus sometimes assert that he changed his ground between the beginning and end of his ministry. But in his first sermon he tells his disciples that, unless their righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, they cannot enter his kingdom. He thus distinctly shows that it was his purpose to lift the Jewish religion out of the formal righteousness of the Pharisees into something higher. The word "Pharisee" means *separation*, and the Pharisees were an order of men who separated themselves from other men in order to practise a stricter religion. They were like many saints in the Church of Rome or some professors of religion in Protestant churches. He, therefore, spoke as a teacher might speak now who should declare, "You cannot be a Christian unless you have a higher style of goodness than those whom the Church calls saints or professors of religion." Jesus describes the goodness he required as inward, not outward; of the spirit, not of the letter; of reality, not appearance. It was not to pray at the corners of the streets, but in the closet; not giving alms in public, to be seen of men; not outward and apparent self-denial, but inward self-denial, solitary prayer, hidden chastity. He thus struck the same note, gave the same warning, and indicated the same evil, as in his last solemn protest at Jerusalem against the method of the Pharisee.

And, again, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared his method of reform to be not destructive, but creative; not to destroy, but to fulfil. He did not come to attack abuses, but to remove them by the impulse and influx of a higher spiritual life. His reform was to be conservative, keeping all the good of the past, adding something better in the future.

Such is the nature of all true reform. A merely negative reform has no roots, and cannot last. Sadduceeism faded away. The opposition to Christ in the early ages, though led by such great thinkers as Porphyry and Celsus, did not arrest the progress of his religion for a moment. In the last century it was thought that Christianity was near its end. Hobbs and Hume in England, Voltaire in France, Lessing and others in Germany, had dug its grave. But their criticism only touched the surface, only helped to remove some unnecessary excrescences from the outside of Christianity, and so really aided its development. It will be the same with the attacks levelled at Christ and the gospel to-day. They make a little noise, they darken the air with a little smoke; but they do not so much as touch the living faith in human hearts.

Every true reform comes not to destroy, but to fulfil. So it was with the Reformation of Luther. He attacked with vigor the abuses of Rome, but it was in the interest of a higher faith. These abuses seemed to him like barriers and fences, which kept the soul from coming directly to God. He demanded freedom of thought, not for the sake of freedom, but for the sake of a higher religion. He said, "Christianity is made for man, not man for Christianity." God sends Christianity to us for our sakes, not for his own. He does not make us slaves of a literal, outward, formal duty, but gives us goodness when he sends us his love. He said, "We are saved by faith"; that is, we have the

power to resist sin when we are able to see the divine love and trust ourselves to God. Then we receive power to conquer evil within and around, and to rise into a grateful and childlike piety. Thus the Lutheran Reformation came, not to destroy, but to fulfil.

Perhaps you may ask, "Was not the anti-slavery reform a merely negative one, and yet was not that an eminently successful one?" It would have been purely negative if it had been merely an attack on an unjust and cruel system, and had consisted only in a denunciation of slavery and slaveholders. But it was more than this. It had its roots in sympathy with the slave, respect for the colored man as a human brother, and the love of universal justice. For the first time it placed colored men on the platform side by side with white men, as companions and equals. It gave Frederic Douglass the same opportunity with Wendell Phillips. The poorest and most ignorant colored man or woman was received as having equal rights in its impartial conventions. During long years it educated the community to believe in the human brotherhood of the black man and the slave. So it came not merely to destroy, but to fulfil. It came, not merely to put an end to chattel slavery, but to render the equal citizenship and the education of the African race a practical possibility.

Jesus has preserved for us and made universal all that Judaism had gained for mankind. He saved the great monotheism of Moses by fulfilling it with a sight of God as the all-loving Father. He saved the law of duty taught in the Jewish law, the outward obedience of the Jewish ethics, by making love its centre and its inspiration. He fulfilled the morality of rules and laws by showing us how to live in the spirit, that we may walk in the spirit. He fulfilled the vague hope of a future immortality by giving us immortal life here and now. When Martha expressed

her feeble hope in a far-off resurrection at the last day, he said, "I am the resurrection and the life." He who believes in Jesus, who shares his faith, has risen above death, and is already immortal.

As long as Christianity remains the highest form of religion known on earth, so long it will continue and fulfil all other beliefs and aspirations. It does not come to destroy any truth or any goodness already existing. It accepts and fulfils them all. Jesus accepted the faith of the Phœnician woman, the benevolence of the good Samaritan, the generosity of the Roman centurion, and blessed them all with an added spiritual life. So Christianity will accept all that is good and true in the Hindu, the Chinese, the Buddhist religions, all that is good and true in the heart and life of the atheist and unbeliever. What will it add to these? It will add a present inspiration, an immediate access to God, a conviction of his all-surrounding care and his ever-present fatherly tenderness. It will add the knowledge of his pardoning and saving grace, his infinite, inexhaustible love. It will add a larger sense of human brotherhood. Christ will accept all the inventions, arts, science, discovery of modern times as in harmony with his own spirit, and will fulfil all by the conviction that they come, not from the will of the flesh or the will of man, but from a Divine Providence. Thus this life will be lifted nearer and nearer to the life to be, will be seen to be not only natural, but supernatural. The New Jerusalem will come down from God out of heaven. A reformed and purified earth will be in close contact with the spiritual and eternal world. Then it will be seen that Jesus has never left the earth; that he is with us still, always fulfilling law by gospel, giving a constant impulse to human progress; with us always, even to the end of the world.